

## Getting Life Right

### *Have You Ever Felt Crushed by Life?*

When I was in high school, I made an all-out effort to get on my high school basketball team. I literally practiced day and night, lifted weights ran and played anyone I could find on one of the basketball courts in my hometown. As a sophomore I knew I was not good enough, but I believed that if I worked at it fiercely, I would be picked to be on the team by my senior year. The varsity coach had open tryouts, and I was among three other seniors trying to be added to the team. Tryouts lasted a week and I practiced with the varsity players already on the team each day after school. I could beat nearly every player one on one so I thought I had a good shot at making the team. Friday, the coach made his decision if any of us who were trying out would be added to the varsity roster. None of us were picked. I was devastated. I did not cry or mope about, but I did not know what to do with myself. Basketball had become my whole life. I was not really mad with the coach for not choosing me and I shouldn't have been, although I thought he was rather daft for not seeing how good I was. The coach had every right to pick who he wanted playing for him. As head coach, he was in a sense, lord of the team. I had no right to tell him how to run his team just as he had no right to tell my parents how to run their household. Today, we are going to look at a critical component to having a contented life. Our big idea is this. You will never be contented if you don't master the art of acknowledging Christ is the Lord of your life.

John 3 provides dramatic insight into the feelings many of John's disciples had regarding Jesus. **They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan — the one you testified about — well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."** (John 3: 26 NIV) They clearly were upset about Jesus' growing popularity but more than that, were concerned about the pecking order of Jesus and John the Baptist in God's Kingdom. It did not seem right to them that Jesus was baptizing more converts than John. We have all been there. It does not seem fair how God is treating us and we want to know why we are not valued more than we are. Perhaps we don't blame God. Maybe we are just frustrated by how things are going for us and we believe we deserve a better life. Discontentment is a plague of the heart that has ruined the lives of countless billions. It leads to bitterness, depression, quarrels, fights and drug and alcohol abuse. It starts just as it did with John's disciples. "This does not seem right."

In reply, John the Baptist provided the theological foundation for contentment. **To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven.** (John 3: 27 NIV) It is hard to grasp this psychologically, nearly impossible for some. There are boundaries in life and although it may be emotionally difficult to accept them, they are there, nonetheless. Imagine going to a store with \$20, wanting to buy steaks. However, a pack of steaks costs \$45. You bring the steaks to the self-check out but all you have is the \$20. You could I guess try to steal them but if you are an honest soul, you will have to go home without the steaks. You could buy chicken because it is only \$20 but the steaks you can't get. What would you do? Would you shout or scream or cry or complain about the evil store management? Would you become depressed or go out drinking to ease your pain? Of course not. That would be silly and childish. Yet many people do not accept the boundaries put in place by God and respond bitterly to being stopped by Him.

We see the animus against God's boundaries throughout Scripture. It started with Eve who was not content with all her blessings but craved the fruit forbidden by God. Jonah the ancient prophet refused to accept God's decision to be merciful to the people of Ninevah and pouted like a child on a sweltering hillside, hoping I guess, that God would change His mind and destroy them. Generally, the most miserable people are those who believe in God but reject His restrictions. Saul, the first king of Israel, knew God had chosen David over him as king. Rather than quietly resigning and enjoying a peaceful life as a wealthy and revered hero in Israel, he became jealous, bitter and paranoid. He tried his best to hunt down David and have him killed rather than join him as co-workers in God's kingdom. The psychological damage caused by refusing to accept the boundaries set by God can be immense.

What John the Baptist reminded his disciples is quite difficult for most people, even in the Church, to grasp or more likely, accept. God decides what you have and what you don't have. It is easy to see this with parents. When a child is quite young, the parents control the flow of what those children have. Everything from the clothes they wear to the food they eat is decided by the parents. We don't feel this is an unbalanced power structure. We understand that is how it needs to be for young children. We trust parents to not abuse their power and to let love guide their decisions.

But do we believe God should have that same power over us? I read recently of a woman who helped raise her nephew, a nephew she said she loved more than anyone else. But in 1944 she received a telegram informing her that the nephew died in battle. She was devastated. The woman noted that up to this point her life had been very good, a happy contented life. But now she was destroyed. Her nephew represented all that was good in the world and now he was gone. The aunt was bitter and resentful. Why did he have to die? His future was bright and now that future was snuffed out. This woman was overwhelmed with grief and saw no reason to keep going. She gave up on her friends, her career, everything that once mattered to her. Deciding she would quit her job and go off to become a recluse in her sorrow, the woman began to clear out her desk at work. She came upon a letter from her nephew, one he wrote just after her mother died. He told her, "Wherever I am, or how far apart we may be, I shall always remember that you taught me to smile and to take whatever comes, like a man." She said that she went back to work. She stopped being rebellious and bitter and repeated again and again that what is past is over and she can't change it. This loving aunt decided that she would live each day fully and not look back. She started writing to other young men fighting on the front lines. She took an adult education class and started making new friends and made peace with her life.

Can each of us receive what comes our way like a true Christian? And like a child who trusts her parents, his parents, believe that no matter what we face, God has worked out everything for our good? Do you remember the terrifying prophecy Jesus gave Peter? **I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.**" (John 21: 18 NIV) Jesus was painting a bleak picture for Peter and the disciple knew it. Did Peter whine about what awaited him? Did he decide God wasn't worth following if he faced such a future? We know Peter lived the rest of his days happily serving Jesus and going wherever God took him, regardless of what awaited him. God is in charge of your life, but you can, like the Israelites in the desert, fret and complain and give up on God when it gets rough. Or you can like Peter live with gusto and enthusiasm the life you have.

Let me share the secret of a happy life I discovered while reading the Bible. The book of Ruth is a biography of a young widow, Ruth. She was not the only widow in the account. Her mother-in-law Naomi was also a widow. Naomi became bitter over the loss of her husband. So much so that she even told the people of her hometown to call her "Bitter" or as it is translated, "Mara" **"Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me."** (Ruth 1: 20-21 NIV) Naomi's anger with God over the troubles she faced was intense and psychologically debilitating. Her daughter-in-law Ruth, who lost her own husband, approached her new life differently. Rather than being bitter, she became better. When Naomi decided to leave Moab where they both lived and move to Bethlehem, Ruth could have chosen bitterness herself. She didn't. Ruth decided to invest her life in caring for and loving her mother-in-law Naomi, who was dry as a bone spiritually and emotionally, who had nothing to give to a relationship. When Naomi tried to talk Ruth out of going with her to Bethlehem, Ruth responded with all the vigor of one who knew the secret of getting life right. **But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God.** (Ruth 1: 16 NIV) Ruth understood what John the Baptist reminds you. God is the one who gives us what comes in our lives. Ruth was not willing to turn her back on God, even in her sorrow and her poverty. Rather she wanted to embrace Him every step of the way. There are two determinations that are key to living at your best and brightest. One, God is in charge of what happens in your life. Two, He loves you with an unwavering devotion to your good and you can trust Him with your life no matter what you face. John the Baptist was not afraid of the popularity Jesus was gaining any more than he was disappointed by the future he faced because he knew that God was in charge of all he encountered and that made him content because He knew God loved him. Here is the big idea. You will never be contented if you don't master the art of acknowledging Christ is the Lord of your life. Take a moment and confess your loyalty to God and declare to Jesus you trust Him to take care of you with the love of a Savior.